[Coonjine in Manhattan]

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Coonjine [?] 3

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COONJINE IN MANHATTAN

On a bright October afternoon I walked along pier-lined West Street that borders the Hudson shore in New York City. Near at hand the city roared past; beyond, rose the Jersey cliffs. Here on West Street there is always a crowding and pushing of ocean vessels—transatlantic and coastwise ships; freighter and “luxury liners”—lying in at their berths, thrusting sharp prows against the very city pavements, or edging away from their wharves in the wake of straining tugboats. Today , there were, as always, crowds of stevedores, longshoremen, and dock laborers on hand, busy about the loading and unloading of cargoes arriving from, or destined for, the ports of the seven seas. Stolidily these men went about their work—Hungarians, Italians, Irishmen, Germans, Swedes, with a fair scattering of the native born product. They seemed to toil with a grim desperation as though the mark they did was distasteful but necessary.

Among the crowd of laborers on this particular day, however, was one—a powerful, gray-haired old Negro—who alone seemed to be enjoying his back-breaking duties. For he was singing at his work. Singing:—chanting, in a rhythmical barbaric sort of regularity, a kind of song that awoke vague nostalgia longings in my innards.

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Coonjine! Was it possible, I asked myself, that here in New York there was a steamboat roustabout—a “Coonjine Nigger”—from 2 the Mississippi country? A stray from my native Midlands and South?

Looking at him closely I could not doubt it. He wore the conventional old battered hat turned up in front, the gunny sack fastened with nails across his chest and shoulders.

Anyone reared along the Inland rivers would know that this was the characteristic dress of the steamboat roustabout, from Cairo, Ill. to St. Louis; from Cincinnati to New Orleans.

I listened carefully to his song as he laid down on the dock a large box from his shoulder and turned back to the ship again. Love her in de sunshine, Love her in de rain! Treats her like a white gal, She give my neck a pain! De mo' I does for Sadie Lee De less dat woman thinks er me ! I had never heard the words before but his manner of singing them smacked undeniably of the river Negro. There was a guileless naivete that I could not mistake. Back in the days when the queenly white steamboats of the Mississippi, the Ohio and Illinois Rivers, were busy carrying the freight and passengers of the American Inland Empre, an army of freight handlers was necessary to take care of the loading and unloading. At one time in the middle of the nineteenth century before the railroads had fully come, nearly two thousand steamboats steamed gracefully along the rivers. One fairly good-sized boat carried fifty roustabouts. Therefore, you can at once apprehend the great need, for strong arms and backs to do the loading and unloading at the city landings where the boats touched. 3 Along the rivers that border Southern Illinois, Kentucky and the Southern States, Negroes gravitated instinctively to the river life. Steamboating appealed to them because of its inherently nomadic character, its constant change of scene, its hours of pleasant idleness on deck, between landings, when a black boy could rest and sleep and roll the spotted ivories with his buddies. The wages were relatively good. Particularly, the food was plentiful and substantial. And that was an important factor in any job! And so from the beginning of steam transportation on the Mississippi (1817) the Negro, as a freight handler—known locally as a roustabout, or in the vernacular a

“rouster”—became an important figure in the mid-American scene. Especially after the long arm of emancipation had freed the slaves and they sought out [?] their own careers.

A roustabout's job while it lasted. . .rolling cotton bales over the stageplanks, carrying tierces of lard and sides of bacon, swinging a recalcitrant pig calf over the shoulder, carrying it squealing along, working in all kinds of weather, and under the constant tongue lashings of a profane and two-fisted steamboat mate. . .was about as hard a job as could be found. Yet the Negroes loved it because there was plenty of time between landings for “restin' up.”

And there was another way to lighten the labor. If a boy put his mind on his work and kept it there, he could not long stand up under the strain. But if he sang while he worked, “released his spirit on the wings of song” while his back bent and the sweat trickled copiously from his pores, he would forget his weariness.

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There is in every rightly constructed Negro a profound sense of rhythm, an inherent love for the beat and timing of music, running back to African days. He sings as naturally as he eats. It was to alleviate the weariness of carrying freight on and off the steamboats, that the roustabouts sang. And the songs they sang and the shuffling, loose kneed dance-job-trot to which they timed their movements, became known among themselves as the Coonjine.

It was such a song that I heard this gray haired brawny Negro singing on the West Street docks, a thousand miles away from the Mississippi country, on this October afternoon.

(No one seems to know definitely where the name “coonjine” came from. Harris Dickson, well known author of Vicksburg, Miss., and an authority on Negro lore, says that the word is possibly of African origin and points out the word “Coonjai” was the African term for a tribal dance. But, Judge Dickson explains farther, roustabouts didn't run much to “derivations” - to Greek or Latin roots. Whenever they wanted a word they made it up

offhand, and usually the word they coined filled the bill so perfectly that it stuck. It may have been so with Coonjine.)

Coonjine songs were not spirituals—neither the genuine nor the “Broadway” variety. There was nothing spiritual about them that I have been able to discover.

Into these songs the rousters put the problems and the incidents of the day's labor, the characteristics of the people they met. The 5 peculiarities of a mate or captain or fellow rouster; the speed and qualities of a particular boat; the charms or meanness of a woman-friend; domestic matters—all these were subjects which the steamboat roustabouts move into the texture of the Coonjine songs with which they lightened the labor of steamboat work. Composed sometimes on the spur of the moment, or garbled versions of songs previously heard, often the words were ridiculous, sometimes senseless, but nearly always ludicrous with occasionally a touch of pathos:

Old roustabout aint got no home, Make his living on his shoulder bone! * * *

There came a lull in the unloading of the ship. The Negro exhaled gustily, mopped his brow and chancing to glance in my direction, grinned and shook his head.

“Sho' is hot!” he announced, “and man is I tired!”

I beckoned him over to one side.

“What boats you work on?” I asked him. “Ever roust on the Kate Adams?”

At which his smile broadened and he broke out in a loud guffaw.

“Go 'long, Boss! You come frum down on the River? Lawd, Lawd! Yassur, I sho'ly did wuk on de ole Lovin Kate. (Dat's whut we useter call de Kate Adams). I wuk on Cap'n Buck Layhe's Golden Eagle, too, an' on de City er Louisville and City er Cincinnati, up on de Ohio River. One time, 'bout fifteen years ago, I rousted fer Ole Cap'n. Cooley up

de Ouachita River. Yassuh!" He turned scornfully to the group of 6 laborers still carrying articles of freight, "Dese hyuh dagoes and furriners—dey don't know nuthin' bout roustin'! Dey doan know nothin' bout Coonjine, like us does out on de river."

"Do you remember any more of those Coonjine songs?" I asked him. Whereupon he at once became a trifle reticent and embarrassed.

"Laway, hit wuz so long ago I mos' fergit 'em. I useter know a lot dem songs when I wuz a young buck. But sense I done got ole, I got me a wife and jined de chu'ch and fergit mos' all dem ole Coonjine songs."

"But you were singing just now," I told him.

"Wuz I?" he asked, his eyes wide. "Well, dat - dat wuz jes cause I wuz workin', boss!" Presently he resumed: "I 'members one song we uster sing on de Lizzie Bay, when she was runnin' from Ragtown ter Cairo."

"Ragtown? Where was that?"

"Aw - dat's jes' de name de rousters give her Cincinnati. So many rags wuz sold and shipped out on de boats ter make paper outen.

"Dat song went dish here way:

De ole Lizzie Bay she comin' roun' de ben' All she's a doin' is killin' up men. De ole Lizzie Bay she's a mighty fine boat But hit take nine syphon ter keep her afloat . "An' boss, you member dat song bout Who been hyuh sints I bin gone? Big ole rouster wid a derby on, Layin' right dar in my bed Wid his heels crack open like cracklin' bread. I whoop my woman and I black her eye, But I won't cut her th'oat kaze I skeered she might die. . . ." 7 I had heard garbled versions of this epic at various river towns, even as I had heard variations of that well-nigh unprintable song with the recurring refrain of "Rango - Rango" and the often twisted, "Roll, Molly, Roll." This seemed to please him mightily. Under

pressure, and in acknowledgement of some silver change, he recalled others of the songs he had chanted years ago, in the days when the big steamboats ran—recalled them slowly, one by one, each song suggesting another. Standing there with him in the West Street pier shed, I gathered a sizeable collection of Coonjine songs. Many, I have no doubt, bore only a slight resemblance to the original wordings. For roustabouts felt, so long as they preserved the thought and central idea and rhythm of a song, they could change the words at will. Sometime they abandoned the existing words and made up new words of their own. I have heard different versions of barely recognizable Coonjine songs in various towns from St. Louis to the Delta. Once, an antiquated porter at the old Holliday House, fronting the river at Cairo, Ill., sang this one for me: “Whar wuz you las' night? O tell me whar you wuz las' night? Rattin' on de job In Saint Chawles Hotel .” Which requires some explanation. “Ratting” in rouster lingo for “loafing.” The St. Charles Hotel referred, not to the historical hostelry in New Orleans of that name, but to a warm cleared space beneath the steamboat boilers on the lower deck on any boat where the rousters, whenever they were able to dodge the vigilant eye of the mate, 8 were wont to hide away and sleep. Many a boat has been loaded, down in the cotton country, to the tune of a two line doggerel: I chaws my terbacker and I spits my juice, Gwinter love my gal til hit ain't no use ! Roustabouts were always hungry. Near the steamboat landing in Vicksburg there stood, back in the eighties and nineties, an old brick bakery which specialized in “nigger belly”—that is, long slabs of ginger bread which sold at the rate of two for five cents. The roustabouts called it “boozum bread.” Boozum bread, boozum bread, I eats dat stuff till I dam near dead ! —sang the roustabouts of the Belle of the Bends of the Senator Cordell or the Belle Memphis, or any other of a dozen boats. Which also requires some explanation. In carrying articles of freight up and down the stageplank a roustabout had to use both hands to balance it on his shoulder or head. Soe he would stuff a strip of ginger bread under his shirt bosom next to his skin, the top extending up almost to his collar. By ducking his chin he could bit out chunks of the stuff (soon softened by sweat) without interference with his work. Hence the name, Boozum (bosom) bread. Vicksburg roustabouts were also partial to this song, which had reference to a certain one-armed

hard-fisted steamboat mate, named Lew Brown. 9 Taint no use for dodgin' roun' Dat ole mate jes' behine you. Better cut dat step and coonjine out Dat ole jes' behine you ! But the songs eulogising the boats themselves stick longer in my mind than any others. There was something intensely personal about a steamboat. To the men who manned and owned and operated them, steamboats had personality. Hence the qualities of certain boats live today in Coonjine songs. . . . The boats of the Lee Line, in the Memphis-New Orleans trade until a few years ago, fed the passengers and crews well; but paid notoriously low wages. Still the Negroes liked to work for the Lee Line. The reason is to be found in this song: Reason I likes de Lee Line trade, Sleep all night wid de chambermaid. She gimme some pie and she gimme some cake, An' I gi' her all de money dat I ever make ! The Anchor Line boats (running from 1869-1911) were each named for a Mississippi River City, and fine St. Louis and New Orleans packets, noted for speed, sumptious cabins and elaborate cuisine. I once met, up on the Ohio River, an old roustabout who called himself Ankline Bob—because, he said, he had worked for the Anchor Line. Bob had the lowdown on the different Anchor Line boats: Dey wuks you hawd but dey feeds you fine On dem big boats er de Anchor Line . There was intense rivalry between the different boats of this line. Notably that between the City of Cairo and the City of Monroe. Both were fine and fast, but the Cairo was once said to have a slight 10 edge for speed on the Monroe. Whereupon the roustabouts on the Monroe would sing: De City of Cairo's a mighty big gun, But lemme tell you whut de Monroe done: She lef' Baton Rouge at haff pass one An' git ter Vicksburg at de settin' er de sun . Another Anchor Liner; the City of Providence, was nicknamed by the roustabouts “The Trusty Trus'” for the reason that her mate was always willing to trust a rouster with a dollar until pay day. They would sing: Me and muh woman done had a fus. . . Gwinter take a little trip on de Trusty Trus.! I owes de lanlady fifty cents, Gwinter roust on de Providence

A song which was popular in America twenty years ago was “Alabama Bound.” An ex-roustabout on the St. Louis levee once explained to me that this song was originally a Coonjine song. The steamboat Saltillo was a doughy little sternwheeler which late in the

evening used to pull away periodically from the landing and turn her nose southward down the Mississippi. At Cairo she would turn into the Ohio and up that stream to the mouth of the Tennessee River, following the lovely channel of that river back into the Muscle Shoals section of Alabama which the great government dams are today being built to improve navigation.

With their usual happy facility for conferring euphonious nicknames, the Negroes called the Saltillo the Sal Teller. Sal Teller leave St. Looey Wid her lights tu'n down. And you'll know by dat She's Alabama bound. 11 Alabama bound! She's Alabama bound! You'll know by dat She's Alabama bound! Doan you leave me here! Doan you leave me here! Ef you's gwine away and ain comin' back Leave a dime fer beer! Leave a dime fer beer Leave a dime fer beer! Brother, if yu gwine away Leave a dime fer beer! I ask de mate Ter sell me some gin; Says, I pay you, mister When de Stack comes in When de Stack comes in When de Stack comes in! Says, I pay you mister, When de Stack comes in . The name Stack, recurring several times in the song, referred to one of the Lee Line boats, the Stacker Lee. Mates and captain, far from objecting to coonjine, encouraged their roustabouts to sing. There was a sound utilitarian reason for this. Anyone who has worked with Negroes knows that they will work better when they work to music, timing their movements to the beat of the tune. A thousand tons of miscellaneous freight and a few hundred bales of cotton could be loaded, to the beat and time of Coonjine, in half the time that songless labor would demand. Coming up the Mississippi on Captain Cooley's little sternwheeler Ouachita in company with Roark Bradford, one early spring, I learned this song from that skillful portrayer of the Negro character: 12 (This was a cotton-loading song heard frequently on the docks at New Orleans). Catfish swimmin' in de river Nigger wid a hook and line Says de catfish, Lookyere, Nigger, You ain' got me dis time. Come on, bale (spoken) - got yuh!

And there was another value to Coonjine. Moving in perfect time meant that the rousters' feet hit the stageplank with uniform precision. A wise thing, too! For if a rouster should step upon the vibrating boards out of time, and thus catch the rebound of the stage-plank, he

was very likely to be catapulted with his load over into that muddy bourne from which no roustabout returns—or rarely so.

A general opinion prevails throughout the River Southland that nobody but the Negroes can sing Coonjine. This may be true, for if you have ever tried to capture a Coonjine tune from hearing a Negro sing it, you must have realized how utterly futile it is to put down in cold black and white on paper the color and barbaric beauty of the tones.

However, an attempt is being made—as this is written—by an accomplished musical composer in Paducah, Kentucky, to bring out a book of Coonjine songs with music. Such a collection would be an invaluable addition to our vanishing Americana.

For this phase of American life is fast vanishing. With the coming of the railroads, the steamboats (as we knew them once) have gone. So have the black freight handlers who by their songs and ever-rebounding good nature, added much to the pleasure of steamboat travel. Many of the old roustabouts have died. More have left their native South and come to the north to live with grown-up “chillens.” You will find them, not only 13 on the West Street docks in New York, but in Cleveland, Chicago, Cincinnati and other cities.

And to those black “creators of American folklore” the writer ascribes this brief tribute.

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